

lar media and civil society programs are a must in sustaining the positive image of the US.

Finally, more important than all of these actions, the US must develop a coherent, long-term and clear vision

for its policies in the South Caucasus and thus commit to this region in a sustainable manner.

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## Obama and Georgia: A Year-Long Awkward Silence

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### Abstract

The Obama administration is struggling to make sense of Georgia's place in US foreign policy. So far, this has turned out to be a rather uneasy task as it is difficult for Washington to explicitly admit that Georgia only has a limited strategic value for US interests, especially after years of massive political and economic assistance to Tbilisi under the Bush administration. Georgia is important only in the regional context of Caspian energy and security in the Caucasus. Therefore, Washington's strategic activity in Georgia has been rather low-key and is likely to remain such for the foreseeable future. The US might consider strengthening its role in the region either because of energy security considerations or some large-scale disturbance caused by aggressive Russian actions, aimed at enhancing Moscow's influence in the post-Soviet space.

### Introduction: Setting the Scene

After the rather dynamic development of the US-Georgia relationship under the Bush presidency, current relations seem to be stagnating as the Obama administration is quite cautious in providing explicit political support to the Georgian government. The question is whether the toning down of the rhetoric also means a real change in the substance of cooperation.

Since Obama took office a year ago, the two sides continued to implement the existing agreements that had been in place under the previous US administration. The last most significant agreement signed under Bush was the "Charter on Strategic Partnership". Despite the grand title, the charter is anything but "strategic" as it does not go beyond a mere declaration of the readiness to cooperate in various fields of mutual interest. The latest meeting under the auspices of this charter, in January 2010, envisaged the encouragement of "people-to-people and cultural exchange programs", ostensibly leaving aside any questions pertaining to the most vital of Georgian national interests – security and territorial integrity.

Moreover, official meetings between the Georgian president and US diplomats and politicians have been largely devoid of any strategic sense and could be said

to have been meetings for the sake of meetings. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton in September 2009 and Vice-President Joe Biden in July 2009 reiterated US support for Georgia's independence and territorial integrity, but things have not really moved further than this.

### Putting the "Chill" in Context

There are a few possible answers as to why Washington is keeping relations with Georgia on a backburner. The most obvious pertains to the US economic crisis and the stretching of US political and military resources, which apparently also prompted Washington to "reset" relations with Moscow. Indeed, the harsh and Cold-War like rhetoric sometimes applied by the Bush administration vis-à-vis Russia now seems a thing of the past. This attitude towards Moscow in fact follows a policy line as proposed by Henry Kissinger already in Summer 2008, just before the outbreak of hostilities between Russia and Georgia, who strongly advocated a US rapprochement with Russia against the background of the leadership change in Moscow.

Alternatively, US caution could have been caused by a more prudent approach towards Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili, whose credentials have been

strongly shaken after his mishandling of the military conflict with Russia in August 2008. Moreover, the Americans may have had little clue of what to do with regard to Georgia at this stage. Therefore, keeping things low-key served a dual purpose – to avoid Moscow’s irritation and also to make it clear that Washington did not betray Saakashvili. There is also a possibility that the representatives of the US administration and President Saakashvili find it rather hard to come to agreement on certain issues of mutual importance, as Saakashvili had enjoyed a much more loyal treatment from the US under the previous Republican administration and would find it difficult to settle for less. Moreover, ideological collusion between the US neoconservatives and Saakashvili is over. Saakashvili has little to share with the current administration ideologically. Therefore, it must be rather difficult for the representatives of the Obama administration to understand, let alone agree to the Georgian leader’s points of view on the most outstanding issues of world politics, first of all US-Russian relations.

The most plausible explanation for the current “chill” in US-Georgian relations is probably the absence of real issues for cooperation. Apart from Georgia’s military support for the US mission in Afghanistan, there are no fields of cooperation with real substance. In the sphere of business, American companies have been very reluctant to invest in Georgia, especially after the double shock of the ongoing world economic crisis and the August 2008 war. American aid to Georgia continues as before, but the extent of the military cooperation became relatively low-key and the aid package of approximately \$1 billion sought to stabilize Georgia’s war-shattered economy, rather than promote promising new cooperative initiatives.

This uncertainty about cooperation may be exacerbated by the new administration’s indeterminate policy towards the wider post-Soviet space and the issues associated with this region, first of all, Caspian energy transportation and democracy promotion. The grand designs of getting Central Asian oil and gas through the Caucasus to the world markets have at best been delayed. With this, Russian cooperation over Afghanistan became more precious as Afghanistan came to the fore of Obama’s security strategy. The dimming prospects for grand futures among the fledgling “colored democracies” have slowly but surely crumbled and dreams of rapid democratization in the post-Soviet space have long dissipated.

Therefore, it seems there is really very little about Georgia that Americans could employ for yet another “grand regional strategy” so far. The previous two phases

– the scenarios of replaying the “Great Game” in Central Asia in the late 1990s, and the “color revolutions” of the mid-2000s are difficult to replicate and it is even more difficult to invent something new along the same scale. With the absence of a comprehensible American “grand strategy” towards the post-Soviet space, Georgia has been left out in the cold.

### US-Georgian Relations: A Reappraisal

The relative thaw in the antagonistic rhetoric between Washington and Moscow set Georgia back to its original “geopolitical” point of departure. Georgia only makes sense in the context of wider US interests in the Central Asian region. These interests include exploitation and transportation of regional energy resources to the world markets with participation of American (as well as European) capital; and the preservation of a durable peace in the region, which has actual and potential security problems of its own, and also borders with the hotbeds of instability – Afghanistan and the Middle East.

None of these two major groups of interests at the current stage involve Georgia as a key factor. In the last few years, Russia (but increasingly also the Chinese) confidently outperformed the US administration in securing access to Central Asia’s oil and gas. While in the longer run Central Asian energy may not necessarily be lost to the West, in the next few years the Obama administration has very limited chances of wresting local riches out of Russian control. Only Azerbaijani oil and gas (in more and more limited quantities) is available for transportation through Georgia. The required infrastructure for transporting Azerbaijani energy is already in place – the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipelines. Agreements over the putative Nabucco pipeline are only in a nascent stage. Even if actually signed, the realization of Nabucco agreements will still depend on the successful resolution of wider geopolitical issues in Central Asia – not least the question of to what extent Turkmenistan’s and Kazakhstan’s energy will flow to China. In either case, Georgia’s place in this game is marginal.

Equally questionable is Georgia’s importance for the US military campaign in Afghanistan. Having reached tentative deals with Russia over NATO supply lines to Afghanistan, Georgia has only a limited role in the logistical infrastructure of the Afghan war. The Georgian military deployment in Afghanistan, helping the NATO troops, is loudly appreciated, yet little related to the overall political calculations regarding Tbilisi’s importance to Washington.

Denial of the immediate Membership Action Plan (MAP) for Georgia by NATO in April 2008 also put the

issue of Georgian importance for Euroatlantic security structures under a big question mark. From the perceived potential provider of security in the turbulent region of the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Middle East, Georgia quickly turned into a strategic liability after the war with Russia in August 2008. Georgia remains a liability for the Alliance to this day and seems to be such for the foreseeable future. Therefore, the only interest the US may have towards Georgia at this stage is making sure Georgia does not turn into a new political headache for the current US administration.

However, despite the above argument, much depends on Moscow's future actions in Russia's immediate periphery. A continued thaw in US-Russian relations cannot be guaranteed. In case of an international crisis involving both the US and Russia, the old mistrust can resurface rather quickly, which would create fertile grounds for resuming the fervent US political and military support for the Georgian government. However, this support may only rest on ideological grounds, fed by a common US-Georgian rejection of Russia's pretensions of securing its "sphere of influence" in the former Soviet space.

### **Conclusion: A Skeptical Outlook**

Unless some large-scale crisis erupts (akin to the Cuban missile crisis or September 11 terrorist attacks), the US is unlikely to undertake any major initiatives in the former Soviet region during Obama's first presidential term. Even in case of a Republican comeback in the US Congress in November 2010, it is highly unlikely that Georgia will gain prominence in Washington's foreign agenda. Therefore, US policy toward Georgia depends more on

two factors exogenous to the domestic politics of US foreign policy making – Russian behavior in the post-Soviet space and the degree of stability in Georgia itself.

An evaluation of the prospects for US-Georgian partnership cannot be made in isolation of the Russian factor. Much depends on how Russians react in the future to certain unwelcome developments that may occur on their periphery. So far, Georgia's setbacks and the expectations of a new president in Ukraine kept Moscow contently vigilant. Yet, one is tempted to see Russians only grudgingly accepting the status quo and holding their anti-American rhetoric at bay. Any regional crisis with Russian political intervention that could also involve American interests – over sovereignty, territorial integrity, or the trading rights of the peripheral post-Soviet space – may elicit a new cycle of US-Russian rhetorical confrontation. How far will Moscow go on the path of expanding its influence over the domestic affairs of Russia's neighbors is the real question here. Any American resistance, even purely rhetorical, is likely to reverse the resetting trend in US-Russian relations.

The Georgian leadership's attitude is important as well. It is likely that Saakashvili will continue his gamble to capitalize on American-Russian contradictions. This is likely even if his grip on political power in Georgia is jeopardized, or the American-Russian "truce" holds. So far, it seems that Saakashvili is waiting for the opportune moment to resume his "special relationship" with Washington and will probably come up with new initiatives on his own. However, unless a major geopolitical earthquake happens in the post-Soviet space, it is unlikely that US-Georgian relations will gain new momentum.

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